

The 20 Ingredients of an Outstanding Destination

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The premise behind outstanding downtown destinations:

1. The heart and soul of any community, besides its people, is its downtown
2. If locals won't hang out in your downtown, neither will visitors
3. The number one diversionary activity of visitors is shopping, dining and entertainment in a pedestrian-friendly, intimate setting.
4. This is where 80% of all visitor spending takes place
5. Your downtown is a litmus test for the health of a community in terms of livability and quality of life

Ingredient #1: A strong brand and retail focus

Branding is perhaps the most misunderstood concept in the world, yet here we are smack dab in the middle of the "Era of the Brand." In ten separate posts, we will detail ten of the most important rules we most often use in describing the process of branding a community.

1. Brands are perceptions

Your community's brand is what people think of you. It's a perception. Logos, slogans and nice looking ads are NOT brands. They are just marketing messages used to support and promote the brand. Do we go to Disneyland because their slogan is "The Happiest Place on Earth"? No, we go to Disneyland because of what we know of it, our feelings and perceptions of the theme park. The slogan simply reinforces that feeling.



2. Brands are built on product

A brand is a promise, and that promise is built on product. Marketing is how you tell the world - how you drive the stake in the ground that says you "own" the brand. You MUST deliver on the promise - with activities, amenities, and ambiance that fulfill your brand promise. Back in the 70s Volvo owned the brand "the safest car," but this wasn't just self-proclaimed or an empty promise. In national tests, they were touted as the safest car to drive. Even though today they are in the middle of the pack in terms of safety, they still own the "safe car" brand.

#3. Brands are earned: Sometimes good, sometimes bad

You never "roll-out" a brand. A brand is something you have to earn. Brands are built over time, particularly community brands. Often communities need to focus on "re-positioning" or a "re-branding" effort in order to change perceptions of the community. Often the perceptions are worse than the reality. The process or repositioning is an arduous and time-consuming process that MUST start within the community.

#4. Brands are built using public relations and word of mouth

You always build a brand through the art of public relations. Advertising is used to maintain your position, once you own the brand. Remember, brands are perceptions - what people think of you. Advertising is what you think of yourself. To succeed you need the third-party endorsement that effective public relations can provide. Start with the web. Blogs, YouTube, reviews, etc.

#5. Brands must be experiential

Community brands must be experiential or activity-driven, not just things to look at. Geography is not a brand,* historic downtowns are not a brand, scenery is not a brand. These are all part of the ambiance. The stage. You can develop a stunningly beautiful theater but if nothing is happening on stage, how many people will go there? Static attractions that are simply things to do see quickly become "been there, done that" experiences, and thus not sustainable brands.

** There are a few exceptions: Niagara Falls, Mt. Rushmore, Yosemite National Park, Lake Tahoe, Grand Canyon, Old Faithful.*

#6. Branding is the art of differentiation

It's what sets you apart from everyone else. When someone mentions your community's name, what is the first thing that comes to mind? The name must become synonymous with the brand. When we mention the following communities, what's the first thing that pops into your mind?

- a) Salem, Massachusetts
- b) Hershey, Pennsylvania
- c) Lancaster, Pennsylvania
- d) Anaheim, California
- e) Williamsburg, Virginia

What communities own these brands?

- a) The country-music capital
- b) The wine capital of the U.S.
- c) The home of Elvis Presley
- d) Disney World
- e) Mardi Gras

Would you have ever heard of Salem, Massachusetts if it hadn't been for the Salem witch trials that took place 316 years ago? A brand sets you apart from everyone else and puts you on the map.

#7. Jettison the generic

You must avoid, at all costs, the generic in your marketing. Especially these days where the internet has leveled the playing field. Look at slogans for communities anywhere. If the slogan can be applied to virtually any community, then it's too generic. Reading the slogan (which should be four words or less) should tell you, instantly, what the community is about. It should bring a picture to mind. The days of "A great place to live, work and play" are over. That's what everyone thinks about their community.

GOOD SLOGANS:

- a) "Game On!" - Round Rock, Texas - The sports capital of Texas
- b) "La Dolce Vita" - Pittsburg, California - a themed downtown Italian village just in the beginning stages. They won't use this until they can deliver on the promise.
- c) "Artfully Yours" - Salado, Texas - the charming arts village in central Texas
- d) "Jump In!" - Moses Lake, Washington - the water sports capital of the Northwest. The community is just in the beginning stages of developing the product that will support the brand.
- e) "The Grand American Experience" - Rapid City, South Dakota - the grandest of American icons are here: Mt. Rushmore, Crazy Horse Memorial, herds of wild bison at Custer State Park, the Badlands of South Dakota, famous Wall Drug, the Black Hills and famous Black Hills Gold.

BAD SLOGANS INCLUDE:

- a) "East Texas. Pure and Simple." - Longview, Texas - \$55,000 later, they tossed this aside for "Real East Texas Living." Both of these could fit just about any community in Eastern Texas - the largest state in the U.S.



b) “Unique by Nature” - McKinney, Texas - this could fit any town anywhere. “Unique” is the most overused word in branding. It’s come to mean nothing.

c) “Naturally Connected” - Peoria, Arizona - Who ISN’T naturally connected? There are hundreds of these: “Naturally Yours,” “Naturally Fun,” “Nature is Our Middle Name,” etc., etc.

d) “Great From the Ground Up” - Greeley, Colorado - Who isn’t? Most everyone thinks this of their community. That’s why they live there!

e) “Every Path Starts With Passion” - Gainesville, Florida - this sounds more like a mission statement than a brand. It also sounds like they are just starting out and are not done yet. Not ready for all of us to visit.

Do any of these slogans tell you what the community is about? Does yours? Do they bring a picture to mind? An expectation? Slogans developed in this manner may make locals feel good for a few weeks, before they become passe, doing nothing to attract new residents, visitors, or industry. They do nothing to set their communities apart from everyone else.

#8. Say no to focus groups

You never build brands using focus groups. Period. If creative services come into your local focus group and sell you on a logo or slogan, are they going to sell it to every other person on earth who sees it? If a slogan has to be explained, toss it. When it comes to creative services, cute and clever rarely work. Wenatchee, Washington is the apple-growing capital of the world, but while “Naturally Appealing” (shown with a peeled apple) is cute, does it make you want to go there? Does it really showcase an activity, an experience?

Communities must understand the difference between their “primary lures” and their “diversions.” The primary lure is the thing that no one else can do or get closer to home and makes you worth a special trip. Diversions are the things you have that we can do closer to home, but will do them while visiting you. Golf, bird watching,

hiking and biking trails, parks, local museums, historic downtowns, wineries, and outdoor recreation are - for the most part - diversionary activities. It’s critical to promote your primary lure first, diversions second.

Sometimes a typical diversion qualifies as a primary lure, if it is truly outstanding. If you have a biking trail that is unlike any other (look up the Route of the Hiawatha near Wallace, Idaho), then promote it. If it sets you apart from everyone else, go for it! Bikers travel across the country to ride the Hiawatha, which meanders over seven high trestles, through ten tunnels, and is best known for the Taft Tunnel, which burrows under the Idaho/Montana state line for 1.78 miles.

It’s OK to be a diversion. Eighty percent of visitor spending takes place on diversions. Why do you think Disney built Downtown Disney right outside Disney World? To grab some (or most of) that 80%.

#10. It takes a village and continuity

It takes a village to build and own a brand: everyone on the same page and pulling in the same direction. It’s a team sport. Can you imagine what would happen if every Coca Cola bottling plant designed its own Coke logo, label, and ad? It wouldn’t exist as a brand. You are much more powerful as one loud voice than a number of small independent voices. So it’s vitally important for the local government, chamber of commerce, business groups, and destination marketing organizations to all work in concert.

Conclusion: “Something for everyone” is not a brand

Find your niche and promote it like crazy. This is the age of specialization - being known for something specific. It’s far better to be a big fish in a small pond, then grow the size of the pond, than it is to be a small fish in a big pond. In the U.S. alone every community has 15,000 other communities trying to compete with them. What sets you apart from everyone else? Whatever it is, build your brand on that.

And when you look for professional guidance, don’t get duped by flashy ads and nice logos. Look at the samples and see if the work really sets their clients apart from their competitors.



Ingredient #2: The Mall Mentality

The minimum “critical mass” of like businesses (clustering) can take place in just two to three lineal blocks.

The minimum mix to make downtown a destination is as follows:

Ten places that sell food: soda fountain, coffee shop, bistro, café, sit-down restaurant, wine store, deli, confectionery.

Ten destination retail shops: galleries, antiques (not second hand stores), collectibles, books, clothing, home accents, outfitters, brand-specific businesses, garden specialties, kitchen stores, cigars, etc.

Ten places open after 6:00 pm: entertainment, theater (movies, performing arts), bars & bistros, specialty shops, dining, open air markets, etc.

Malls die unless they:

Have consistent hours and days they are open; Are home to ONLY retail businesses that fit the brand; Promote their anchor tenants; Are open well into the evening hours; Have “anchor tenants”



Ingredient #3: Quality merchandise

People are spending at the top of the market – particularly in downtown locations.

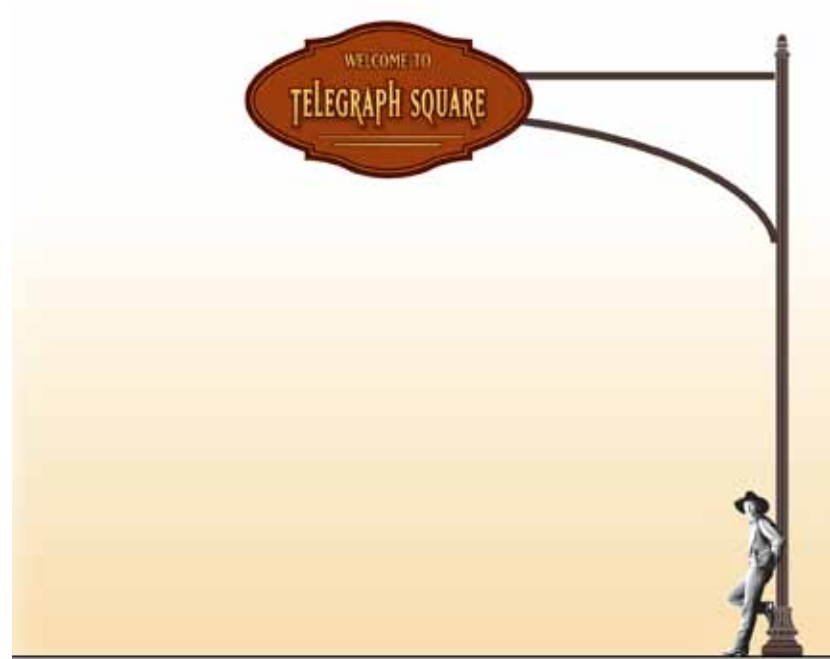
Look at the demographics of visitor spending:

- The baby boom generation accounts for 80% of all visitor spending
- 350,000 people, in the U.S. are turning 50 years old – every month
- This will continue for another seven years
- They are in their peak earning years and control 70% of North America’s wealth
- Key ingredients to tapping into the market: comfort (the top 15% of lodging properties in terms of quality command 85% of the leisure market)
- Key months for travel: April, May, September, October
- Experiences embraced by boomers: Culinary tourism, artists in action, ethnic events, home and garden, open air markets



Ingredient #4: The Good First Impression & Sense Of Place

- Look at all gateway signage: does it reflect well on downtown?
- Always place your gateway signs where you make the first, best impression
- Signage at city limits should be directional signage to key downtown districts. For instance "Downtown Anywhere – 1 mile."
- Place gateways at your downtown or district entrances. These can span the street, include decorative crosswalks, pole banners and other identifiers creating a "sense of arrival."



Ingredient #5: A Name (District Identities)

Give downtown a name. This will make it a destination, as opposed to just a place. It will also get downtown on highway signage.

Popular downtown district names include:

- Pearl District in Portland, Oregon
- Bricktown in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma
- Gastown in Vancouver, British Columbia
- Pioneer Square in Seattle, Washington
- Gaslamp Quarter in San Diego, California
- Baker Street in Nelson, British Columbia
- The Rail District in Snoqualmie, Washington
- Bourbon Street, The French Quarter in New Orleans, Louisiana
- Marketplace in Woodlands, Texas
- The Riverwalk in San Antonio, Texas
- Patriot Square in Hawthorne, Nevada



Ingredient #6: Intimate Surroundings

The biggest trend in successful downtowns in the creation of intimate surroundings:

- Narrower streets
- Wider sidewalks
- Street trees every 30' to 35'
- Buffers between sidewalks and traffic or parking
- Decorative crosswalks
- Decorative night-lighting
- Architectural lighting

Other common ingredients include:

- Water features
- Sidewalk cafes and exterior dining



Ingredient #7: Excellent Curb Appeal

- Extension of window displays to exterior spaces, NOT outdoor merchandising. Folding tables, boxes of goods, shopping carts piled with goods, clothes racks rolled outside are NOT good examples of curb appeal and should be discouraged or not allowed.
- Create a merchant driven Signage & Display Committee that approves merchant signage, the use and design of sandwich boards, and exterior displays.
- The most important element of curb appeal is the softening of the transition of building facades and the sidewalk, not curbside street trees and landscaping. While this is very important, merchants must do their part to pull visitors into their shops.
- Shoppers, besides word of mouth, typically only have curb appeal to count on in determining whether or not a shop is worth visiting. Curb appeal can account for 70% of visitor sales at restaurants, retail shops, hotels and lodging facilities, golf courses and wineries.



Ingredient #8: Good retail signage

- Develop perpendicular or “blade signs” in core downtown districts
- Typical guidelines: no lower than 7', no higher than 9', no wider than 42". Keep them consistent in height and width so you don't create sign clutter.
- Create a merchant-driven signage review committee. This would include retail signage, the use of sandwich boards, extension of window displays into exterior spaces.
- Businesses need to promote, on signage, the key “lure” more than the name of the business.



Ingredient #9: Wayfinding System

- Wayfinding should be decorative to fit the brand
- It should include both vehicular wayfinding as well as pedestrian wayfinding signage
- Never more than five items on any one sign
- Use 1" tall letters for every 12' of viewing distance
- Use “identifier” kiosks or maps to showcase district boundaries and key amenities and/or attractions.
- Every community should develop and implement a signage plan and program: wayfinding, gateways and entries, billboards and marketing displays, amenity identifiers. Nationally, less than 5% of visitors stop at visitor information centers – IF they can find that.
- Wayfinding also educates local front-line employees of what you have to offer and where it's located.



Ingredient #10: Gathering Places

Turn parks into plazas. Common ingredients include:

- Permanent home for an outdoor open market with permanent structures. Open air (Farmers) markets should be placed in the heart of spending districts.
- Interactive water features
- Multiple stages
- Pocket parks or small venue plazas
- Amphitheaters
- Trees and raised planters
- Public art
- Night lighting and walking areas
- Music
- Angle-in parking generates increased sales over parallel parking. Additionally you'll get a third more spaces in the same space.



Ingredient #11: Convenient, long term parking

- Two-hour parking in a pedestrian-friendly downtown restricts spending. Shopping, dining and entertainment will typically keep people busy for four hours.
- If you insist on two-hour parking, then identify WHERE the all-day or extended hour parking is located.
- It doesn't have to be free, but needs to be reasonable.
- Consider incentive parking programs:
 - Spend \$20 or more and get the parking free
 - Have local banks and businesses "sponsor" free-parking days or evenings
 - Reduce the parking fees the longer they park downtown
- Angle-in parking generates increased sales over parallel parking. Additionally you'll get a third more spaces in the same space.



Ingredient #12: Public restrooms

- The number one reason passers-by stop in a town is to use restroom facilities.
- Restrooms should be in the heart of spending districts. Once visitors get out of the car, you have a four-times greater chance of getting them to spend money.
- Make sure they are open 24-hours a day



Ingredient #13: 24 hour visitor information

- Travelers don't just travel during business hours. Make sure your visitor Information is working 365 days a year, 24 hours a day.
- Put up visitor information kiosks and outdoor brochure holders at local attractions, parking areas, and visitor amenities.
- Make sure you have signage that notes 24 hour visitor info is there.
- Include brochure distribution. This is a must. Have you ever said, "Honey, grab the clipboard so we can write down some of this stuff"?
- Develop one design of kiosk that fits your brand, and duplicate it in various places throughout the community - at high visitor traffic areas. The average community may have between six and ten kiosks.
- The contents of each kiosk should be slightly different, cross-selling attractions and amenities in other areas of the community.
- Work with your local auxiliary organizations on the development and maintenance of your kiosks. Have them professionally designed.
- Create two styles of kiosk: freestanding, and wall-mounted.



Ingredient #14: Activities & Entertainment

Bring downtown to life!

- Open air markets should operate for at least three days a week, during at least a 24 week season (depending on location)
- Invite street musicians and street artisans on weekends
- Recruit outside events into plaza areas



Ingredient #15: Activities after 6:00

- 70% of all consumer spending (both locals and visitors) takes place after 6:00 pm. Are you open?
- People spend the night where there are things to do after 6:00 pm. Visitors don't like sitting in a hotel room after dinner watching TV.
- Conferences and conventions are booked around things to do AFTER the meetings adjourn that day
- The majority of the businesses must be open after 6:00, not just a few. If half the stores in the mall closed at 6:00 rather than 9:00, would you go to the mall after 6:00?
- Start by staying open on Friday and Saturdays until 7:00 pm the first year, then add Thursday, then Wednesday. Then go to 8:00 - it takes years to make this change.
- Bring nighttime music and entertainment downtown to provide incentives for people to go there
- Property owners can specify that tenants open and close at certain hours - just as in retail malls. It starts with them and existing tenants.



Ingredient #16: Invitations, not rejections

- Get rid of the “Closed” signs and instead use “We’ll be open” signs.
- Never use “restrooms are for customers only” or “no public restrooms” signage. Instead, tell customers WHERE they can find restrooms.
- Always invite customers back and NEVER send them away. You are in the hospitality industry.



Ingredient #17: Pioneers With Patient Money

- Every downtown revitalization effort requires property owners with patient money, the will to “make a difference” and the ability to think long-term.
- Reduce rental rates until you develop the critical mass so that key merchants can stay alive until you become a destination downtown.
- Incentives need to happen from the property owners in terms of rent abatements, reduced lease rates, and a focus on the tenant mix: the critical mass.
- It takes one-third of the property owners, working together, to “reinvent” downtown in terms of business mix, curb appeal, upper story living units, etc.



Ingredient #18: People Living Downtown

- The reinvention of downtowns also includes residential upper-story development: condos, loft apartments, downtown hotels and a business mix to support them.
- Residential drives retail. What comes first? A downtown that people will want to live in. This includes businesses open AFTER 6:00, entertainment, all in a pedestrian-friendly, attractive downtown setting – a “Third Place:” the place we want to live and hang out.
- Hotel development downtown is another great mix that provides “new” customers nearly every day. Hotel development helps restaurants and destination retail shops flourish.



Ingredient #19: Enthusiasm!

- As Ralph Waldo Emerson once stated, “Nothing great was ever accomplished without enthusiasm.” Every downtown effort requires tireless pioneers and those who will champion the cause. Enthusiasm is contagious and is the foundation for every revitalization effort.
- The other motto in any downtown redevelopment effort: “From small beginnings, come great things.”



Ingredient #20: A Plan

- Create a Community/Downtown Development, Branding & Marketing Plan - an action plan with detailed recommendations. Who should do it, when it should be done, how much it will cost to implement, where the money would come from, and the rationale for the recommendation.
- The plan should include: Product development, upgrades and improvements, repositioning and branding, attractions and events, wayfinding, signage and gateways, visitor amenities and services, critical mass, beautification, marketing and public relations, public/private partnerships, recruitment, funding and budgets, organizational development.
- An Action Plan provides a to-do list for multiple organizations, where a Strategic Plan provides general strategies, goals, and objectives. Every community needs an Action Plan ready for implementation.
- It includes branding (what do we want to be known for?), development (what do we need to build to own the brand), and marketing (how do we tell the world and cement our position?).



Start with an assessment. This is a look at the community through the eyes of a visitor. It's a look using all the rules outlined in the book *The 25 Immutable Rules of Successful Tourism*. The assessment process looks at your branding efforts, marketing, signage and wayfinding, retail mix, things to see and do, lures and diversions, product development, infrastructure, etc.

For every shortcoming, suggestions are offered to provide ways and ideas for taking the steps to a more vibrant downtown and/or tourism industry. The assessment process often allows someone from the outside to say the things that need to be said, but aren't often addressed because of the political fallout.

The assessment is meant to be a conversation starter. It's the first part of the overall plan - where you are today. The plan goes on to determine where you want to go and how to get there.



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